

The Vampire 150

Chapter 150 150: Departing the High Pass

Ashlynn's final day in the High Pass was quiet and subdued compared to her arrival among the Frost Walkers. The people from the Vale of Mists held themselves apart in the vast fortress, clustering around the room Nyrielle had taken as her own or focusing on their preparations to leave.

Once again, though she felt that she should be spending time getting to know the Frost Walkers or at least spending time with Hauke after what they had both been through, Ashlynn remained with Nyrielle, even while her lover slept away the daylight hours.

In Nyrielle's opinion, Lord Ritchel needed to complete some housekeeping before she was willing to extend the same level of trust to them that she had on arrival. It was important to reset expectations and her refusal to allow Ashlynn to mingle further with the people of the High Pass was part of her rebuke for the incident.

Now that night had fallen on her final day among the Frost Walkers, Ashlynn looked at the people who had come to see her off with mixed feelings. The icy wind scoured almost all life from the tops of the mountains and she felt like she had been subjected to those very same winds.

When she infiltrated the Summer Villa, she put herself at risk. She killed Sir Kaefin because she had to and part of her had rationalized that as killing a man who was guilty of crimes that his station prevented him from being punished for. She didn't know that those crimes warranted death, but it helped her to process what happened at the time.

Sir Broll had been different. As one of the men who dragged her into the Vale of Mists and buried her in a shallow grave, she'd vowed to end his life. Doing so hadn't felt like what she expected, but it was still necessary and she was able to do it in a way that preserved the lives of not only her friends and allies, but Sir Broll's innocent followers as well.

Neither of those deaths had changed the way she thought of herself, at least, not by much. Now, however, after fighting the Tuscans and surviving what had followed the battle on the lake, things were different. It was one thing to know that soldiers would die for their lords and ladies, it was another entirely to watch it happen.

Her father had taught her that this was the burden of a ruler. That whether one was a baron or a king, so long as there were soldiers under their command, the day would come when they could only sit helplessly on their throne and await word of who had lived and who had died. Her studies of other lords, particularly the Lothians, had contained many similar sentiments.

Now, however, she felt like she finally understood the Eldritch way, and the conclusion was very different. An Eldritch Lord or Lady ruled because they had greater strength than anyone under their protection. Once Nyrielle arrived, she'd swept aside the danger that threatened Ashlynn and the others because at her core, that was who she was. No one was allowed to threaten the people under her protection, especially Ashlynn.

But Ashlynn herself was far too weak and inexperienced to act in the same way. Andrus had died because of the greed of Tuscan Hunters and the cowardice and treachery of Paulus, but he had also died because Ashlynn herself didn't understand her powers well enough to protect him.

Humans might not see it that way, but the more time she spent among the Eldritch, the less she considered herself to be the same as the humans who had raised her. Her father, even if he were to put on his armor and take up a sword, could only do so much on the field of battle. He might as well sit on his throne for all the difference it would make. But she was different, and as she prepared to leave the High Pass, she finally admitted to herself how different she'd become.

"Lady Ashlynn," Lord Ritchel called out, stepping away from the Frost Walker leaders who had gathered to see them off and approaching her directly. "When you pass through on your return home, I will send

a proper gift of thanks for taking care of my son. It wouldn't be appropriate to send you with burdens on your way to the Mother of Thorns."

"Still, the journey is long," he said, waving over a pair of Frost Walkers carrying a small metal box. "I did not expect to find a human who saw fish eggs as a delicacy. You called it 'caviar' in your language didn't you? At least allow me to send some with you for your journey. When you return, we will feast properly and show our gratitude properly as well."

"Hauke took care of me as well," Ashlynn said politely accepting the gift. "When I next visit, I hope things will be less eventful," she added pointedly. Nyrielle had made her stance clear and Ashlynn would echo that stance as well.

"Ashlynn," Hauke said, stepping forward a touch awkwardly. "When you next pass though, I'd like to visit the Vale of Mists. If, if that's all right," he said, scratching the fur behind his head with a bit of embarrassment. His father had told him about her invitation, but after the way things had gone, it still felt a little inappropriate.

"Come here," Ashlynn said, holding her arms open wide. When she hugged him, she used enough strength to remind him that she wasn't as fragile as her size might lead a Frost Walker to expect before she stepped back and held one of his hands in both of hers.

"I know you've resolved to use those horns to study," she said, looking into his watery eyes. "I don't know if that's good or not. I don't entirely trust those ancestors. They were sealed away for a reason. But Mistress Nyrielle believes they may also help you find new strength so I won't argue with you. Instead, I'll say good luck, and I look forward to seeing what you've learned when I come back."

"I promise," Hauke said solemnly. "By the time you return, I won't be as weak as I was on that day."

"Neither will I," Ashlynn said, releasing his hand and turning to the waiting carriage. "But Hauke," she said, turning back toward him. "If those ancestors harm you, I will grind their horns to dust myself. No one is allowed to bully my friends," she said, giving a frosty look to the gathered Frost Walkers before joining Nyrielle in the carriage.

Several of the elders muttered darkly at the young witch's domineering tone. It seemed that she was taking directly after her Mistress and would give no respect to the strength of the Frost Walkers or to their traditions.

The few younger Frost Walkers who had considered themselves to be Torsten's companions, however, swallowed heavily when they heard her words. While they'd been shocked to learn of their friend's betrayal, a few of them thought that Torsten's death would open the door for them to contend with Hauke to be the next Lord of the High Pass.

Hearing this witch threaten to grind horns to dust for bullying Hauke, however, many of them had second thoughts about continuing to antagonize Lord Ritchel's son.

"I like seeing you this way," Nyrielle said, wrapping her arms around Ashlynn when she entered the carriage. "Owain was a fool to take you so lightly and a greater fool for harming you. He has no idea what's coming for him when you get home."

"I wasn't this strong then," Ashlynn said, shaking her head and leaning into Nyrielle's embrace. "Much of my strength flows from you. Without you, I wouldn't be much of a threat."

"For now, my darling," Nyrielle said, gently stroking Ashlynn's pale blonde hair and inhaling her lover's unique fragrance. Even in this place of ice and snow, Ashlynn still always smelled like she'd recently gone for a walk in the forest and it was a scent that Nyrielle was beginning to find a special kind of comfort in.

"But only for now," she added quietly, her lush lips only inches from Ashlynn's ear. "After all, my darling Ashlynn is becoming a force of nature. Who could possibly stand in your way once you've had time to grow?"